

NEWCOMB (Simon)

THE RELATION OF SCIENTIFIC METHOD TO  
SOCIAL PROGRESS.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Philosophical Society of Washington,

DECEMBER 4TH, 1880,

BY

SIMON NEWCOMB,

RETIRING PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.



WASHINGTON:  
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AMONG those subjects which are not always correctly apprehended, even by educated men, we may place that of the true significance of scientific method, and the relations of such method to practical affairs. This is especially apt to be the case in a country like our own, where the points of contact between the scientific world on the one hand, and the industrial and political world on the other, are fewer than in other civilized countries. The form which this misapprehension usually takes is that of a failure to appreciate the character of scientific method, and especially its analogy to the methods of practical life. In the judgment of the ordinary intelligent man there is a wide distinction between theoretical and practical science. The latter he considers as that science directly applicable to the building of railroads, the construction of engines, the invention of new machinery, the construction of maps, and other useful objects. The former he considers analogous to those philosophic speculations in which men have indulged in all ages without leading to any result which he considers practical. That our knowledge of nature is increased by its prosecution is a fact of which he is quite conscious, but he considers it as terminating with a mere increase of knowledge, and not as having in its method anything which a person devoted to material interests can be expected to appreciate.

This view is strengthened by the spirit with which he sees scientific investigation prosecuted. It is well understood on all sides that when such investigations are pursued in a spirit really recognized as scientific, no merely utilitarian object is had in view. Indeed it is easy to see how the very fact of pursuing such an object would detract from that thoroughness of examination which is the first condition of a real advance. True science demands in its every research a completeness far beyond what is apparently necessary for its practical applications. The precision with which the astronomer seeks to measure the heavens, and the chemist to determine the relations of the ultimate molecules of matter has no limit, except that set by the imperfections of the instruments of

research. There is no such division recognized as that of useful and useless knowledge. The ultimate aim is nothing less than that of bringing all the phenomena of nature under laws as exact as those which govern the planetary motions.

Now the pursuit of any high object in this spirit commands from men of wide views that respect which is felt towards all exertion having in view more elevated objects than the pursuit of gain. Accordingly it is very natural to classify scientists, and philosophers with the men who in all ages have sought after learning instead of utility. But there is another aspect of the question which will show the relations of scientific advance to the practical affairs of life in a different light. I make bold to say that the greatest want of the day, from a purely practical point of view, is the more general introduction of the scientific method and the scientific spirit into the discussion of those political and social problems which we encounter on our road to a higher plane of public well being. Far from using methods too refined for practical purposes, what most distinguishes scientific from other thought is the introduction of the methods of practical life into the discussion of abstract general problems. A single instance will illustrate the lesson I wish to enforce.

The question of the tariff is, from a practical point of view, one of the most important with which our legislators will have to deal during the next few years. The widest diversity of opinion exists as to the best policy to be pursued in collecting a revenue from imports. Opposing interests contend against each other without any common basis of fact or principle on which a conclusion can be reached. The opinions of intelligent men differ almost as widely as those of the men who are immediately interested. But all will admit that public action in this direction should be dictated by one guiding principle—that the greatest good of the community is to be sought after. That policy is the best which will most promote this good. Nor is there any serious difference of opinion as to the nature of the good to be had in view; it is in a word the increase of the national wealth and prosperity. The question on which opinions fundamentally differ is that of the effects of a higher or lower rate of duty upon the interests of the public. If it were possible to foresee, with an approach to certainty, what effect a given tariff would have upon the producers and consumers of an article taxed, and, indirectly, upon each member of the community in any

way interested in the article, we should then have an exact datum which we do not now possess for reaching a conclusion. If some superhuman authority, speaking with the voice of infallibility, could give us this information, it is evident that a great national want would be supplied. No question in practical life is more important than this: How can this desirable knowledge of the economic effects of a tariff be obtained?

The answer to this question is clear and simple. The subject must be studied in the same spirit, and, to a certain extent, by the same methods which have been so successful in advancing our knowledge of nature. Every one knows that, within the last two centuries, a method of studying the course of nature has been introduced which has been so successful in enabling us to trace the sequence of cause and effect as almost to revolutionize society. The very fact that scientific method has been so successful here leads to the belief that it might be equally successful in other departments of inquiry.

The same remarks will apply to the questions connected with banking and currency; the standard of value; and, indeed, all subjects which have a financial bearing. On every such question we see wide differences of opinion without any common basis to rest upon.

It may be said, in reply, that in these cases there are really no grounds for forming an opinion, and that the contests which arise over them are merely those between conflicting interests. But this claim is not at all consonant with the form which we see the discussion assume. Nearly every one has a decided opinion on these several subjects; whereas, if there were no data for forming an opinion, it would be unreasonable to maintain any whatever. Indeed, it is evident that there must be truth somewhere, and the only question that can be open is that of the mode of discovering it. No man imbued with a scientific spirit can claim that such truth is beyond the power of the human intellect. He may doubt his own ability to grasp it, but cannot doubt that by pursuing the proper method and adopting the best means the problem can be solved. It is, in fact, difficult to show why some exact results could not be as certainly reached in economic questions as in those of physical science. It is true that if we pursue the inquiry far enough we shall find more complex conditions to encounter, because the future course of demand and supply enters as an uncertain

element. But a remarkable fact to be considered is that the difference of opinion to which we allude does not depend upon different estimates of the future, but upon different views of the most elementary and general principles of the subject. It is as if men were not agreed whether air were elastic or whether the earth turns on its axis. Why is it that while in all subjects of physical science we find a general agreement through a wide range of subjects, and doubt commences only where certainty is not attained, yet when we turn to economic subjects we do not find the beginning of an agreement?

No two answers can be given. It is because the two classes of subjects are investigated by different instruments and in a different spirit. The physicist has an exact nomenclature; uses methods of research well adapted to the objects he has in view; pursues his investigations without being attacked by those who wish for different results; and, above all, pursues them only for the purpose of discovering the truth. In economical questions the case is entirely different. Only in rare cases are they studied without at least the suspicion that the student has a preconceived theory to support. If results are attained which oppose any powerful interest, this interest can hire a competing investigator to bring out a different result. So far as the public can see, one man's result is as good as another's, and thus the object is as far off as ever. We may be sure that until there is an intelligent and rational public, able to distinguish between the speculations of the charlatan and the researches of the investigator, the present state of things will continue. What we want is so wide a diffusion of scientific ideas that there shall be a class of men engaged in studying economical problems for their own sake, and an intelligent public able to judge what they are doing. There must be an improvement in the objects at which they aim in education, and it is now worth while to inquire what that improvement is.

It is not mere instruction in any branch of technical science that is wanted. No knowledge of chemistry, physics, or biology, however extensive, can give the learner much aid in forming a correct opinion of such a question as that of the currency. If we should claim that political economy ought to be more extensively studied, we would be met by the question, which of several conflicting systems shall we teach? What is wanted is not to teach this system or that, but to give such a training that the student shall be able to decide for himself which system is right.

It seems to me that the true educational want is ignored both by those who advocate a classical and those who advocate a scientific education. What is really wanted is to train the intellectual powers, and the question ought to be, what is the best method of doing this? Perhaps it might be found that both of the conflicting methods could be improved upon. The really distinctive features, which we should desire to see introduced, are two in number: the one the scientific spirit; the other the scientific discipline. Although many details may be classified under each of these heads, yet there is one of pre-eminent importance on which we should insist.

The one feature of the scientific spirit which outweighs all others in importance is the love of knowledge for its own sake. If by our system of education we can inculcate this sentiment we shall do what is, from a public point of view, worth more than any amount of technical knowledge, because we shall lay the foundation of all knowledge. So long as men study only what they think is going to be useful their knowledge will be partial and insufficient. I think it is to the constant inculcation of this fact by experience, rather than to any reasoning, that is due the continued appreciation of a liberal education. Every business man knows that a business-college training is of very little account in enabling one to fight the battle of life, and that college bred men have a great advantage even in fields where mere education is a secondary matter. We are accustomed to seeing ridicule thrown upon the questions sometimes asked of candidates for the civil service because the questions refer to subjects of which a knowledge is not essential. The reply to all criticisms of this kind is that there is no one quality which more certainly assures a man's usefulness to society than the propensity to acquire useless knowledge. Most of our citizens take a wide interest in public affairs, else our form of government would be a failure. But it is desirable that their study of public measures should be more critical and take a wider range. It is especially desirable that the conclusions to which they are led should be unaffected by partisan sympathies. The more strongly the love of mere truth is inculcated in their nature the better this end will be attained.

The scientific discipline to which I ask mainly to call your attention consists in training the scholar to the scientific use of language. Although whole volumes may be written on the logic of science

there is one general feature of its method which is of fundamental significance. It is that every term which it uses and every proposition which it enunciates has a precise meaning which can be made evident by proper definitions. This general principle of scientific language is much more easily inculcated by example than subject to exact description; but I shall ask leave to add one to several attempts I have made to define it. If I should say that when a statement is made in the language of science the speaker knows what he means, and the hearer either knows it or can be made to know it by proper definitions, and that this community of understanding is frequently not reached in other departments of thought, I might be understood as casting a slur on whole departments of inquiry. Without intending any such slur, I may still say that language and statements are worthy of the name scientific as they approach this standard; and, moreover, that a great deal is said and written which does not fulfill the requirement. The fact that words lose their meaning when removed from the connections in which that meaning has been acquired and put to higher uses, is one which, I think, is rarely recognized. There is nothing in the history of philosophical inquiry more curious than the frequency of interminable disputes on subjects where no agreement can be reached because the opposing parties do not use words in the same sense. That the history of science is not free from this reproach is shown by the fact of the long dispute whether the force of a moving body was proportional to the simple velocity or to its square. Neither of the parties to the dispute thought it worth while to define what they meant by the word "force," and it was at length found that if a definition was agreed upon the seeming difference of opinion would vanish. Perhaps the most striking feature of the case, and one peculiar to a scientific dispute, was that the opposing parties did not differ in their solution of a single mechanical problem. I say this is curious, because the very fact of their agreeing upon every concrete question which could have been presented, ought to have made it clear that some fallacy was lacking in the discussion as to the measure of force. The good effect of a scientific spirit is shown by the fact that this discussion is almost unique in the history of science during the past two centuries, and that scientific men themselves were able to see the fallacy involved, and thus to bring the matter to a conclusion.

If we now turn to the discussions of philosophers, we shall find at

least one yet more striking example of the same kind. The question of the freedom of the human will has, I believe, raged for centuries. It cannot yet be said that any conclusion has been reached. Indeed I have heard it admitted by men of high intellectual attainments that the question was insoluble. Now a curious feature of this dispute is that none of the combatants, at least on the affirmative side, have made any serious attempt to define what should be meant by the phrase freedom of the will, except by using such terms as require definition equally with the word freedom itself. It can, I conceive, be made quite clear that the assertion, "The will is free," is one without meaning, until we analyze more fully the different meanings to be attached to the word free. Now this word has a perfectly well-defined signification in every day life. We say that anything is free when it is not subject to external constraint. We also know exactly what we mean when we say that a man is free to do a certain act. We mean that if he chooses to do it there is no external constraint acting to prevent him. In all cases a relation of two things is implied in the word, some active agent or power, and the presence or absence of another constraining agent. Now, when we inquire whether the will itself is free, irrespective of external constraints, the word free no longer has a meaning, because one of the elements implied in it is ignored.

To inquire whether the will itself is free is like inquiring whether fire itself is consumed by the burning, or whether clothing is itself clad. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that both parties have been able to dispute without end, but it is a most astonishing phenomenon of the human intellect that the dispute should go on generation after generation without the parties finding out whether there was really any difference of opinion between them on the subject. I venture to say that if there is any such difference, neither party has ever analyzed the meaning of the words used sufficiently far to show it. The daily experience of every man, from his cradle to his grave, shows that human acts are as much the subject of external causal influences as are the phenomena of nature. To dispute this would be little short of the ludicrous. All that the opponents of freedom, as a class, have ever claimed, is the assertion of a causal connection between the acts of the will, and influences independent of the will. True, propositions of this sort can be expressed in a variety of ways connoting an endless number of more or less objectionable ideas, but this is the substance of the matter.

To suppose that the advocates on the other side meant to take issue on this proposition would be to assume that they did not know what they were saying. The conclusion forced upon us is that though most spend their whole lives to the study of the most elevated department of human thought it does not guard them against the danger of using words without meaning. It would be a mark of ignorance, rather than of penetration, to hastily denounce propositions on subjects we are not well acquainted with because we do not understand their meaning. I do not mean to intemperately philosophize itself is subject to this reproach. When we see a philosophical proposition, couched in terms we do not understand, the most modest and charitable view is to assume that this arises from our lack of knowledge. Nothing is easier than for the ignorant to ridicule the propositions of the learned. And yet, with every resource, I cannot but feel that the disputes to which I have alluded prove the necessity of bringing scientific precision of language into every demand of thought. If the discussion had been confined to a few, and other philosophers had analyzed the subject, and showed the fallacious character of the discussion, or had pointed out where opinions really might differ, there would be nothing derogatory to philosophy. But the most suggestive circumstance is that although a large proportion of the philosophic writers in recent times have devoted more or less attention to the subject, few, or none, have made even this modest contribution. I speak with some little confidence on this subject, because several years ago I wrote to one of the most acute thinkers of the country, asking if he could find in philosophical literature any terms or definitions expressive of the three different senses in which not only the word freedom, but nearly all words implying freedom were used. His search was in vain.

Nothing of this sort occurs in the practical affairs of life. All terms used in business, however general or abstract, have that well-defined meaning which is the best requisite of the scientific language. Now one important lesson which I wish to inculcate is that the language of science in this respect corresponds to that of business; in that each and every term that is employed has a meaning as well defined as the subject of discussion can admit of. It will be an instructive exercise to inquire what this peculiarity of scientific and business language is. It can be shown that a certain requirement should be fulfilled by all language intended for the discovery of truth, which is fulfilled only by the two classes of

language which I have described. It is one of the most common errors of discourse to assume that any common expression which we may use always conveys an idea, no matter what the subject of discourse. The true state of the case can, perhaps, best be seen by beginning at the foundation of things, and examining under what conditions language can really convey ideas.

Suppose thrown among us a person of well-developed intellect, but unacquainted with a single language or word that we use. It is absolutely useless to talk to him, because nothing that we say conveys any meaning to his mind. We can supply him no dictionary, because by hypothesis he knows no language to which we have access. How shall we proceed to communicate our ideas to him? Clearly there is but one possible way, namely, through his five senses. Outside of this means of bringing him in contact with us we can have no communication with him. We, therefore, begin by showing him sensible objects, and letting him understand that certain words which we use correspond to those objects. After he has thus acquired a small vocabulary, we make him understand that other terms refer to relations between objects which he can perceive by his senses. Next he learns, by induction, that there are terms which apply not to special objects, but to whole classes of objects. Continuing the same process, he learns that there are certain attributes of objects made known by the manner in which they affect his senses, to which abstract terms are applied. Having learned all this, we can teach him new words by combining words without exhibiting objects already known. Using these words we can proceed yet further, building up, as it were, a complete language. But there is one limit at every step. Every term which we make known to him must depend ultimately upon terms the meaning of which he has learned from their connection with special objects of sense.

To communicate to him a knowledge of words expressive of mental states it is necessary to assume that his own mind is subject to these states as well as our own, and that we can in some way indicate them by our acts. That the former hypothesis is sufficiently well established can be made evident so long as a consistency of different words and ideas is maintained. If no such consistency of meaning on his part were evident, it might indicate that the operations of his mind were so different from ours that no such communication of ideas was possible. Uncertainty in this respect must

arise as soon as we go beyond those mental states which communicate themselves to the senses of others.

We now see that in order to communicate to our foreigner a knowledge of language, we must follow rules similar to those necessary for the stability of a building. The foundation of the building must be well laid upon objects knowable by his five senses. Of course the mind, as well as the external object, may be a factor in determining the ideas which the words are intended to express; but this does not in any manner invalidate the conditions which we impose. Whatever theory we may adopt of the relative part played by the knowing subject, and the external object in the acquisition of knowledge, it remains none the less true that no knowledge of the meaning of a word can be acquired except through the senses, and that the meaning is therefore limited by the senses. If we transgress the rule of founding such meaning upon meanings below it, and having the whole ultimately resting upon a sensuous foundation, we at once branch off into words without sense. We may teach him the use of an extended vocabulary, to the loss of which he may apply ideas of his own, more or less vague, but there will be no way of deciding that he attaches the same meaning to these terms that we do.

What we have shown true of an intelligent foreigner is necessarily true of the growing man. We come into the world without a knowledge of the meaning of words and can acquire such knowledge only by a process which we have found applicable to the intelligent foreigner. But to confine ourselves within these limits in the use of language requires a course of severe mental discipline. The transgression of the rule will naturally seem to the undisciplined mind a mark of intellectual vigor rather than the reverse. In our system of education every temptation is held out to the learner to transgress the rule by the fluent use of language in which it is doubtful if he himself attaches clear notions, and which he can never be certain suggests to his hearer the ideas which he intends. Indeed, we not infrequently see, even among professed educators, expressions of positive antipathy to scientific position of language so obviously opposed to good sense that they can be attributed only to a failure to comprehend the meaning of the language which they criticise.

Perhaps the most injurious effect in this direction arises from the natural tendency of the mind, when not subject to a scientific

discipline, to think of words expressing sensible objects and their relations as connoting certain supersensuous attributes. This is frequently seen in the repugnance of the metaphysical mind to receive a scientific statement about a matter of fact simply as a matter of fact. This repugnance does not generally arise in respect to the every day matters of life. When we say that the earth is round we state a truth which every one is willing to receive as final. If without denying that the earth was round, one should criticise the statement on the ground that it was not necessarily round but might be of some other form, we should simply smile at this use of language. But when we take a more general statement and assert that the laws of nature are inexorable, and that all phenomena, so far as we can show, occur in obedience to their requirements, we are met with a sort of criticism with which all of us are familiar, and which I am unable adequately to describe. No one denies that as a matter of fact, and as far as his experience extends, these laws do appear to be inexorable. I have never heard of any one professing, during the present generation, to describe a natural phenomenon, with the avowed belief that it was not a product of natural law; yet we constantly hear the scientific view criticised on the ground that events may occur without being subject to natural law. The word "may," in this connection, is one to which we can attach no meaning expressive of a sensuous relation.

This is, however, not the most frequent misuse of the word may. In fact, the unscientific use of language to which I refer, is most strongly shown in disquisitions on the freedom of the will. When I say that it is perfectly certain that I will to-morrow perform a certain act unless some cause external to my mind which I do not now foresee occurs to prevent me, I make a statement which is final so far as scientific ideas are concerned. But it will sometimes be maintained that however certain it may be that I shall perform this act, nevertheless I may act otherwise. All I can say to this is that I do not understand the meaning of the statement.

The analogous conflict between the scientific use of language and the use made by some philosophers, is found in connection with the idea of causation. Fundamentally the word cause is used in scientific language in the same sense as in the language of common life. When we discuss with our neighbors the cause of a fit of illness, of a fire, or of cold weather, not the slightest ambiguity attaches to the use of the word, because whatever meaning may

be given to it is founded only on an accurate analysis of the ideas involved in it from daily use. No philosopher objects to the common meaning of the word, yet we frequently find men of eminence in the intellectual world who will not tolerate the scientific man in using the word in this way. In every explanation which he can give to its use they detect ambiguity. They insist that in any proper use of the term the idea of power must be eliminated. But what meaning is here attached to the word power and how shall we first reduce it to a sensible form, and then apply its meaning to the operations of nature? That this can be done, I by no means deny. All I maintain is that if we shall do it, we must pass without the domain of scientific statement.

Perhaps the greatest advantage in the use of symbolic and other mathematical language in scientific investigation is that it cannot possibly be made to mean anything except what the speaker means. It adheres to the subject-matter of discourse with a tenacity which no criticism can overcome. In consequence, whenever a science is reduced to a mathematical form its conclusions are no longer the subject of philosophical attack. To secure the same desirable quality in all other scientific language it is necessary to give it, so far as possible, the same simplicity of signification which attaches to mathematical symbols. This is not easy, because we are obliged to use words of ordinary language, and it is impossible to divest them of whatever they may connote to ordinary hearers.

I have thus sought to make it clear that the language of science corresponds to that of ordinary life, and especially of business life, in confining its meaning to phenomena. An analogous statement may be made of the method and objects of scientific investigation. I think Professor Clifford was very happy in defining science as organized common sense. The foundation of his wisest generalizations is laid not in any artificial theories, but in the natural beliefs and tendencies of the human mind. His position against those who deny these generalizations is quite analogous to that taken by the Scottish school of philosophy against the skepticism of Hume.

It may be asked, if the methods and language of science correspond to those of practical life—why is not the every day discipline of that life as good as the discipline of science? The answer is, that the power of transferring the modes of thought of common life to subjects of a higher order of generality is a rare faculty

which can be acquired only by scientific discipline. What we want is that in public affairs men shall reason about questions of finance, trade, national wealth, legislation and administration with the same consciousness of the practical side that they reason about their own interests. When this habit is once acquired and appreciated, the scientific method will naturally be applied to the study of questions of social policy. When a scientific interest is taken in such questions, their boundaries will be extended beyond the utilities immediately involved, and then the last condition of unceasing progress will be complied with.





